

Expert Comment by Dr. Deborah Jump

Fighting for Change? How we need to reconsider anti-crime boxing schemes.

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<http://www.hope.ac.uk/news/expertcomment/newsitems/expertcommentfightingforhangereconsideringanti-crimeboxingschemes.html>

More than 700 people have signed a petition to save an anti-crime boxing fitness programme used by about 9,000 young people a week in Derbyshire. BBC news on the 2nd Jan reported that OzBox, a police led anti-crime initiative had lost £430,000 worth of lottery funding, and therefore was closing its doors. Unable to fund the scheme itself Derbyshire police officer Steve Osbaldeston and MBE recipient felt it had become “unsustainable”, even though the scheme attracted such high numbers of young people.

It is not uncommon for schemes such as OzBox to come and go; the notion of diversionary activities for young people ‘at risk’ came to the fore under New Labour’s Positive Futures schemes and similar targeted youth provisions during this time. The aim of these schemes is to attract and engage young people who might otherwise be involved in anti-social behaviour during these times, therefore providing structured activity and positive reinforcement for those that choose to participate. Fight for Peace in London is a perfect example, <http://www.fightforpeace.net/academia-londres>. Their recent report boasts of savings to the taxpayer in the region of £1,059,471 in the form of reduced crime costs, and argues that 165 crimes were

avoided as a result of engaging 800 participants during the year 2011. However, as we know, statistics often lie.

Undoubtedly, sport is a beneficial activity for people both young and old, and the health benefits are clearly evidenced. Nonetheless, very little research has actually been conducted into the discourses inherent in combat sports such as boxing, and the impact that these have on attitudes towards violence both in and outside the gym environment. Indeed, we can see how very recent media reports have highlighted how certain sporting figures and role models have perpetrated acts of violence outside the gym and off the field (see Oscar Pistorius or Ched Evans for further discussion).

My recent research into this phenomenon actually highlighted that while schemes such as OzBox are great at incapacitating young people during periods of peak youth nuisance, or when they may otherwise be involved in criminal activity, the messages transmitted and inculcated in the gym are not always beneficial to a reduction in violent attitudes and youth crime. My data highlighted that hyper-masculine discourses such as those that advocate for *fighting through pain, no pain no gain*, and words such as chicken to emphasise cowardly behaviour as opposed to warrior and gladiator to emphasise bravery, arguably contribute towards behaviours that view violence and dominance as a practical solution to a problem. This is not to say that all boxing gyms or combat sports are conducive to violent crime, but the messages transmitted within these sporting environments need to be explored and addressed in a more systematic way.

Much attention is paid in sporting discourses to win at all cost attitudes, and the maintenance of respect and/or losing with pride. For some young men, arguably those who are marginalised and therefore targeted by schemes such as OzBox,

disproportionally place an emphasis on the maintenance of respect and the culture that accompanies this. This can be seen outside of the gym and in the communities, in which they reside, as recent reports from Manchester Metropolitan University scholars such as Hannah Smithson, illuminates the issues facing communities with high rates of gang-related youth violence. Therefore, my argument is such, that the logic and discourses of the boxing gym can reinforce attitudes favourable to violence and the maintenance of respect. Moreover, previous assumptions in sporting and desistance literature, argues that while relevant, diversionary activities and sport-based programmes that incapacitate are only one element in the theory of change. In conclusion, I argue that boxing can actually trap young men in an attendant culture of respect that requires them to respond in aggressive ways to maintain an image of both masculinity and respect. This attendant culture - that is transposable between gym and street – can override the pro-social incapacitating elements that the boxing gym can offer, and reinforces the logic and discourses that evokes and traps men in habits of responding to violence, therefore in terms of future policy and practice new directions need to be sought.